

MEETING SUMMARY: FREIGHT RAIL ADVISORY COUNCIL

Meeting Time and Location

The first Freight Rail Advisory Council meeting for the *Louisiana Statewide Transportation Plan Update* was held on April 18, 2001 at the Marriott Hotel in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The Freight Rail Advisory Council is comprised of 17 members, 12 of which are from the railroad industry.

Meeting Attendees

The following persons attended the meeting:

Advisory Council Members/Representatives

- ☐ Gerald Hutchinson, New Orleans Public Belt Railroad

Non-Member DOTD Staff

- ☐ Carol Cranshaw
- ☐ Brian Parsons
- ☐ Bill Shrewsberry
- ☐ D. J. Webre
- ☐ Art Rogers

Consultant Team Members

- ☐ Richard Taylor, Wilbur Smith Associates (Presenter/Facilitator)
- ☐ Justin Fox, Wilbur Smith Associates
- ☐ Dale Janik, Wilbur Smith Associates
- ☐ Dr. Jay Jayawardana, UNO Ports & Waterways Institute
- ☐ Dr. Anatoly Hochstein, UNO Ports & Waterways Institute

Others

- ☐ Jim Harvey, NORPC
- ☐ K. Parsons, RPC
- ☐ John Irion, South Tangiparola Parish Port Commission

Meeting Purpose

The purpose of the meeting was to provide Advisory Council members with an overview of the Plan Update, and a review of freight rail planning related elements discussed at the first Statewide Transportation Conference held in New Orleans on July 31-August 1, 2000. The meeting also was to discuss strategic issues and suggested changes to the overall goals and objectives included in the 1996 *Statewide Intermodal Transportation Plan* (SITP).

Summary of Meeting Comments

Important comments relating to discussion of previously identified issues are summarized as follows:

- ❑ Regarding “R-5: Establish a freight railroad intermodal grant program”, Brian Parsons said the state funding of a sugarcane transport movement may not continue because the movement is “uneconomic”. There are equipment issues, i.e., loading problems with the cranes, he said. To cut costs, containers on flatcars may be used. Brian questioned the wording, “The public partner requirement is too restrictive.” Gerald Hutchinson added that the New Orleans Public Belt was investigating moving containers on flatcars from the Port of New Orleans to outlying areas in order to relieve congestion on highways. He suggested using containers and flatcars could reduce costs, as Brian had noted.
- ❑ Regarding “R-6: New Orleans East Bridge Junction – Rail Gateway Case Study”, Brian Parsons said the study is going well, and that he was reviewing the modeling the following day (April 19).
- ❑ Regarding “R-7: Consider a public role in enhancing rail access,” Brian Parsons said he is not sure if he agrees with this item. Gerald Hutchison said that providing access was the reason for the establishment of the New Orleans Public Belt in the first place. Carol Cranshaw said that access is not just a federal issue. That is, economics makes access a local issue; the Feds are too far removed to affect decisions with respect to access. Brian reiterated that he wondered what the state’s role would be. Dr. Jay opined that there is a strong case for public involvement in railroads (though not specifically with regard to access enhancement), as 90 percent of the state’s rail traffic is related to ports; also the state’s short lines cannot handle heavier car weights. Carol added that the need for passenger travel opportunities makes public involvement with freight issues a public issue as well. Bill Shrewsberry refocused everyone on the original intent of this item, pointing out that it has to do strictly with enhancement of access. Specifically, it was aimed at getting shippers more competitive rates. The consensus was that the wording of this item is confusing. It should be clear that its intent pertains to enhancing shipper access to the rail system and enhancing competitive rate making. This likely will require a title change for this item.
- ❑ Regarding “I-1: Improve coordination among intermodal planning and program management systems, while preserving and enhancing modal identity.” Bill Shrewsberry felt a lot needs to be coordinated with six Class 1 railroads serving the state. For example, “Where are the grade crossing problems handled – on the rail side or on the highway side?” he asked. Dr. Jay mentioned that rail haulage of hazardous materials is another area where coordination is needed. Carol Cranshaw mentioned that the DOTD’s rail staff is in the midst of reorganization, which once done, should be able to pursue these issues with the freight railroads in a coordinated manner.
- ❑ Regarding “I-3, Expand railroad/highway grade crossing programs,” Bill Shrewsberry said that while the grade crossing program is getting more money, the funding is not yet up to the \$9 million identified in the presentation. He also mentioned:

- There are “too many crossings” in the state, for which his group is responsible. He finds it difficult to find the time to pursue Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) grade crossing projects beyond the concept stage.
 - DOTD is having trouble getting the cities and parishes to respond to their duties with regard to grade crossings. His group is trying to educate local agencies.
 - Grade crossing closures are unpopular.
 - There are six Class 1s, but the same standards for grade crossings must apply to all on an undifferentiated basis. This is frustrating, Bill said, for some differentiation needs to occur simply because not all crossings are equal. While traffic is changing (i.e., increasing) on various rail lines, the standards have not changed. For example, the KCS line across northern Louisiana now has 20 trains a day, up substantially over recent years.
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- Regarding “I-5, Develop and implement a statewide policy relating intermodal transportation planning with economic development objectives,” Bill Shrewsberry said that short lines always have problems dealing with Class 1s and that they have track maintenance issues. Brian Parsons concurred, mentioning that Louisiana has ignored the consequences of heavier car weights (286,000-pound and 315,000-pound cars), and that these consequences are getting to a critical point. He also mentioned that there are indirect social and environmental costs of shipping by truck, which are getting high and reaching a critical mass. Rail has advantages over trucking in terms of environmental cost. Bill said there is no funding for the rehabilitation of short lines.
 - Regarding “I-7: Establish a program to acquire/preserve abandoned railroad right-of-way,” Gerald Hutchison mentioned that the KCS rail line beside the New Orleans International Airport might be useful for light rail. If KCS were to be acquired by another Class 1, that acquiring railroad might sell the line to pay for the merger. Bill Shrewsberry noted that not all lines need to be saved; he is not in favor of saving everything.
 - Regarding “I-8, Expand public awareness and law enforcement officer training to improve safety at rail-highway grade crossings,” Gerald Hutchinson said that Operation Lifesaver is being expanded along the riverfront in New Orleans.
 - Regarding “I-11, Create an intermodal terminal access improvement program,” Jim Harvey said that railroads are starting to talk with MPOs about ways to find federal dollars to build intermodal connectors. In dealing with the Class 1s, it is key to find the right people to talk with. An appropriate venue in which to meet the right people may present itself at the next meeting of the New Orleans East Bridge Junction – Rail Gateway case study group.
 - Regarding “I-13: Upgrade the existing Almonaster Avenue/CSX railroad bridge spanning the Industrial Canal in New Orleans to eliminate operational bottlenecks,” Jim Harvey said that the dollars to do this are being put together now. Specifically, the last part of the funding has not been “locked down.”

Rail Plan Elements

Bill Shrewsberry asked if Class 1 railroads would be included, as well as if safety issues would be addressed. Richard Taylor said that WSA would be talking to the Class 1s, not just to the short lines, and that the plan would include a safety section. Richard added that there would be an intermodal section as well, wherein facilities and more far-reaching issues would be noted.

Gerald Hutchinson said that Amtrak's use of various lines in Louisiana makes public dollars available for maintenance and capacity improvements. He suggested that projects for which public dollars could be obtained be noted in the plan.

Transportation System Goals and Objectives

Regarding Goal 4, there was some confusion voiced as to the meaning of "competitive." Dick answered that it refers more to mobility; that is, the choice for shippers of modal options.

Comments

Since only one member of the council was present, it was not possible to elect a chair. This will be done at a later date. Mr. Hutchison requested copies of the presentation and minutes be forwarded to him and he will try to persuade more council members to participate in future meetings.